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**Connecticut Veterans' Affairs Committee
February 23, 2016 Public Hearing**

Testimony in favor of bills SB 205, HB 5353

Good afternoon Senator Flexer, Representative Hennessy, Senator Gomes, Representative Nicastro, and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am Dawn A. McDaniel, President of Bravo Delta Consulting, LLC a certified Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business. Bravo Delta Consulting, LLC specializes in women veterans' advocacy and bridging the military/civilian cultural divide. We work with companies, organizations, and communities to build successful and effective veterans' initiatives and programs.

Less than one percent (1%) actively serves in the US Military, and there is roughly seven percent (7%) veterans in the workforce. This leaves the majority of the Nation with little to no direct knowledge or understanding of the military and its culture. Unfortunately, many civilians obtain their information from news and movies, which often misrepresent the military culture, values, and competencies.

Understanding the military culture lays the groundwork for building effective veterans' initiatives and programs. When programs are developed by civilians who have little to no knowledge of the unique challenges, attributes, and competencies military servicemembers possess, they are set up for failure from the onset.

Women veterans' are a population that is grossly underserved and undervalued. The general assumption is that men serve in our Armed Forces, and programs and initiatives are developed through this lens. It is time for the women veteran lens to be applied to these initiatives. In order for initiatives to be successful, they must provide services and benefits to all veterans, not simply a select few deemed worthy by those with limited exposure and experience with the military and its culture.

Below are the bills I support with justification for why they are important in supporting all veterans.

S.B. No. 205 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING WOMEN VETERANS. (VA).

I fully support this bill! Women veterans proudly served. They were not required to serve, in fact, they weren't even asked to serve. Their service is as valuable as a man's,



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and must be recognized so that more women are able to stand proud of their service, instead of having it constantly minimized.

My personal story.

As woman veteran who transitioned to Connecticut from active duty over 13 years ago, I know firsthand the struggle to identify resources and get the support I have earned. Upon moving to Connecticut, I contacted the State Veteran Affairs Department to seek transition support for employment, programs, and benefits I was eligible for in the state. I didn't even receive a response. After further investigation, on my own, I learned that because I exited the Army in 2000, not 2001, my benefits were limited. Meanwhile, my husband, who left the Army in 2002 and transitioned to Connecticut from active duty at the same time, was easily able to identify benefits and programs available to him.

There was no way for me to identify as a veteran, be connected with other women veterans in the state, or learn of benefits and programs that would benefit me. Even though I contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs directly, registered for veteran plates, and sought help through the Department of Labor, they did not capture me as a veteran in the state. As a result, when women veteran's programs were piloted, I was not even notified or made aware of these programs.

While the state has made great progress in supporting veterans over the past 13 years, women veterans remain largely invisible. *Our service is often undermined and ignored.* Veterans' services are rarely viewed through the women veteran lens or tailored to our unique challenges and needs, leaving the transition support inadequate at best.

Finding women veterans

As a result of minimizing women's service, many women do not identify with being a veteran or find it too difficult to continue to fight for the services they need and have earned. Connecticut must do a better job of recognizing women veterans and making it safe to self identify. Further, when they do self identify, they need the opportunity to join a veteran registry so that they are aware of programs and benefits available to them.

Unemployment

Unemployment among women veterans 44 years old and younger remains above average, while the Nation celebrates that veteran employment is at an all time low. In fact, in July 2015 the unemployment rate for women veterans aged 35-44 was nearly double that of their male counterparts. This doesn't even begin to address the issue of



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underemployment. *This is unacceptable.* Why is there less attention on this statistic? This lack of awareness and acknowledgement to the problems facing women veteran transition is the exact reason we need to pass this bill.

Women veterans have earned their benefits, just as men veterans have. Their service is equal to that of their male counterparts, yet their needs have been unrecognized leading to a significant lack of support. Our women veterans deserve more from the state of Connecticut!

Best practices in other states

During my work with the Council of State Governments, I learned that best practices prioritizing women veterans' initiatives include a women veteran coordinator. Without this dedicated, paid resource, women veterans have no advocate, and unfortunately get lost in the process. Some of the states that have a women veteran coordinator include Nevada, Florida, Kentucky, Indiana, Missouri, Texas, Oregon, Ohio, Georgia, and Washington. In these states, they have programs in place to identify, educate, and celebrate women veterans.

Training

As previously mentioned, women veterans' service is often overlooked, undermined and misunderstood, resulting in a lack of awareness and understanding of the challenges and needs of women veterans. The training module and annual refresher training will serve as a foundation for those assisting and serving women veterans, and allow them to provide more effective service.

H.B. No. 5353 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMISSION TO THE STATE VETERANS' HOME. (VA)

I support reforms to eligibility for admission to the State Veteran's Home. Many veterans have served in a time of peace. Servicemembers have no input as to when our Nation will go to war. Instead, they bravely train and prepare for war; standing ready to answer the call and defend our Nation every day, regardless of what is happening in the world during their service. Their service and personal sacrifice is no less than those who served during a time of war and should not be minimized by the decisions of politicians and a time of peace.

I also support the lowering of continuous residence from two years to thirty days. Often veterans are geographically separated from family or their durable power of attorney for



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Health Care Decisions when they are diagnosed with chronic and disabling medical conditions. Relocating to be closer to these support systems, during this time, can be critical to their overall health care and quality of life. Current state resident requirements for eligibility may leave some veterans otherwise eligible at risk of homelessness, and lack of adequate health care support.